

DOMESTIC VIOLENCES: OCTOBER 31— NOVEMBER 16, 2016

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The night before I had uneasy dreams about it, not nightmares exactly, but a sense throughout my sleep that I would not have the courage to do it.

All day leading up to the killing I felt unsure if we would be able to pull it off.

It was an absurd chore. Absurd, noble, melancholy and necessary.

Taking a test in a subject you haven't studied, giving a testimony in a language you don't know.

We knew that we would need several hours to kill the hens. It might take longer, depending on how things went. So at 3pm, with a few hours of daylight left, we started.

We could fail, we reasoned. The worst thing that could happen is we'd slaughter the hens and bury them, or drop them in the

compost pile along with deadheaded flowers, coffee grounds, food scraps, yard clippings, dried plants, leftover soil, sawdust, and the shells from the eggs that the hens themselves had laid and that we had eaten.

The black hens were there when we came to the house. They had been threatened with death before, and survived: when we moved in, Russ asked us if we wanted them. They were sitting peacefully in the henhouse. If not, he said, I'll take them out back and shoot them.

There had been something of a siege on the chickens all summer. It started in June, when Zora visited with her girlfriend's dog, Dolores. As Zora and I carried a rolled-up tarp into the barn, Dolores lunged at Casper the rooster.

Zora hollered "Dolores" into the grass behind the barn. Moments passed. Then she ran to the place in the deep grass where the dog and the rooster were. She pulled the dog away, and the rooster stood up and blinked, took a few steps east. The place between the wings on his back was torn open, exposing red muscles and veins. We saw that he would not be able to recover from this injury, although he was unfazed and eager to return to what he was doing. Sarah took him

into the barn and used the metal “killing cone” to cut off his head. Before she did it, she held him in her arms and said goodbye. There would be no more crowing in the morning. She walked out of the room with tears streaking her face and blood on her sleeves where she had held him.

In August, I found a kitten dead in the driveway. One of the barn kittens that skitter on the far edge of my awareness of animals—whole and perfect-looking.

What pained me was not its death. Such kittens are malnourished and inbred, and not likely to survive by necessity. It was its appearance in plain sight that pained me. This small inhabitant of the shadows, forced out of them forever. I buried the kitten in the tall grass near Casper’s invisible grave.

In September, another of the black hens was killed by DeeDee, Fern’s sister-cattle dog. I only know because I saw the hen in the compost with its black wings splayed open.

This morning I rose early and leapt out of bed.

I fear hyperbolizing my own suffering—
making it mean something more than it does.

The fear of hyperbole compounds the suffering itself.

The fear, arguably, makes the suffering more worthy of the “extreme” status it is afraid of expressing.

But I woke up today without this fear, and moved quickly to make preparations.

I dressed and packed a bag and was out of the house in the still-dark.

Anyone who has ever ridden the subway in the early hours of the morning knows who they will see there: brown and black people, many of them men, going to work. They go to unload trucks and boats, to open up diners, delis, shoe stores, office supply stores, to sweep and mop government offices. They go to turn on the lights and the heat and prepare the food for the rest of the city to eat.

Buddhists say early morning is the most spiritually active time of day.

When I sat down in the one available seat, the man seated to my left said “Good morning.”

He wore a bright orange beanie and a camouflage coat. His gray beard touched his collar.

“Good morning.

How are you today?”

“I’m alright.

You going to work?”

“No, I’m going upstate.”

“I see you’re wearing black.”

“Yes, I expect to wear black for a long time.”

“Upstate, it’s cold up there.”

“Yeah, I know. No snow yet.

My boyfriend lives
outside Margaretville.”

“Oh, okay, okay.”

“You from the city?”

“Nah, I’m from the south. Virginia.

Not *West* Virginia.”

“You going to work?”

“Yeah.”

“Where do you work?”

“Uh...Chinatown. Yeah.”

“You been in the city long?”

“Yeah, 20 years.”

“I bet it’s changed a lot since then.”

“Yeah, sure enough.”

“It’s scary.”

“I know.

We have to stick together.”

***ATTENTION LADIES AND GENTLEMEN IF YOU SEE
A SUSPICIOUS PACKAGE OR ACTIVITY ON THE
PLATFORM OR TRAIN DO NOT KEEP IT TO YOURSELF
TELL A POLICE OFFICER OR AN MTA EMPLOYEE
REMAIN ALERT AND HAVE A SAFE DAY***

“What’s that?”

“I said we have to stick together.”

“Yeah. We’re in for a *bumpy ride*.”

“You have family here in the city?”

“No...my nieces and nephews are here. They’re grown...I’m going down to Virginia for Christmas.”

“That’s good.”

“Well, this is my stop. Nice to meet you. Thomas.”

He offered me his left hand, and I took it in my right hand and squeezed.

“Iris. Nice to meet you, Thomas. Have a good day.”

A fear that makes me insert disclaimers into all my sentences—

Not that I know, not that I’m in a position to say, saying this as a white woman, as a white person, as a middle-class person, saying this as an academic, as a leftist, saying this not knowing what I’m talking about, saying this, talking without really knowing.

At 3pm we walked into the barn with a bucket and a filet knife. The hens, lured into the coop with the false promise of food.

Without discussing, we agreed that “Blindy” would go first. I wrapped my hands around Blindy’s wings and brought her into the other room.

It was hard to get her into the cone. She wriggled once she was upside down, and her head didn’t stick out of the cone as planned.

As I tell this story, the look of the sun on the bare trees out the window strikes me, strikes my senses.

Return to the original fact of being struck.

“Striking” can be used as a neutral term. Funny that. I who have been struck, have been pierced, have been held up, have been made not to think about certain things.

Thinking about them now,
giving a testimony in a language I don’t speak.

I who have been taught to use the passive voice. We who have been taught not to say, you struck me, you cut me, he held her up, they forced me into silence.

Marcus grabbed Blindy's feet and adjusted her in the cone so that her head emerged, upside-down, from the bottom. Then she was still. Her head moved from side to side, her one eye blinking. I placed the bucket underneath. After a few more silent moments, Marcus stepped forward, took her head in his right hand, and cut it off with the knife in one gesture. He held her head in his hand as she died through a series of minutes, each separated from the others, her beak still opening and closing.

It was my turn. I struggled to get hold of one of the black hens. The birds squawked and scrambled around the coop. But once I got ahold of her, it was easy to get her into the cone. The warm grip of my hands around both her legs, stuffing her body downward. I wrapped my fingers in a ring around her neck and stretched it out. When it was time to cut, I pulled the knife into her throat, fast,

the way you run across the road when there is a car coming and you're not sure you'll make it—

I pulled into a small space I didn't know could be pulled through, a space more terrible for how small it was. Keep going, I could hear Marcus say. Then her head came off in my mind, in my hand, and the bare extension of her neck curled and craned wildly as if searching the room for her own eyes.

“The beaver moon looks terrible,” Marcus muttered, coming back to bed early this morning. I was warm, naked and half-asleep under the covers.

Last night we looked at the moon through a telescope on his front porch. The closest to the Earth that it’s been since 1948. Wrinkles and dips in the surface of the talcum-white planet appeared when I put my eye to the scope.

“It’s a living thing...”

“It’s a heavenly body,” my lover said. We stood looking from the cold front porch a long time.

The radical astrologer Chani Nicolas writes that,

this full moon sits within four degrees of the fixed star, Algol. Sometimes called Lilith by the ancient Hebrew star-gazers, and called the blinking eye of Medusa by the Greeks, Algol is a star that was feared by all. The myths associated with Algol illustrate the suffering, pain and horror that come with deep betrayal. As well as the creative, regenerative power that that is accessible to us when we address the harsh blows that life deals us.

As we stood on the porch looking at the bright Beaver Moon, two of the four hens we killed that day bubbled in a pot on the stove with black-eyed peas, onions, celery and bay leaves. Their four scaly severed feet sat neatly on the counter.

After cutting off the hen's heads, we brought them into the kitchen in a bucket. We dunked each bird in water that was hot, but not boiling, just long enough to loosen the feathers. We pulled the feathers out in handfuls and slipped the skin off the feet like stockings. The toenails came off with a popping sound.

These animals are bred to make them easy to process, I thought. Their bodies readily yield to being dismantled.

When the feathers were off we used the same filet knife to cut a ring around each bird's anus. Not knowing how to be careful, I pulled at what I felt inside the bird and kept on pulling, soft organs encased in yellow fluid, pockets of shit and golden fat. My bare hand entered and pried what it could from the inner walls.

The smell made me dizzy. Marcus gutted his birds steadily beside me.

Standing on the porch in the light of the Beaver Moon and the unseen light of Algol, the blinking eye of Medusa, our now-clean, sweet-smelling hands touch each other. The smell of chicken stew draws us indoors.

This morning I walked into the sauna at the YMCA thinking about a strange fight I had with a strange man on the street last night.

Thinking about it, accessing the residues of sorrow in my armpits and navel as I wrapped a damp pink towel about myself. I climbed to the top bench of the sauna and pressed my back against the wall.

My legs extended themselves.

The names he called me, oh, what he threatened to do to me. The words were rocks I'd carried all night, still hot from the fire of our fight over nothing. Anyone who's ever bumped into the wrong stranger late at night knows.

Still, tears beaded in my eyelids.

Water on the dark, private surface of Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt.

A woman who I'd seen in water aerobics came in and sat down with a towel wrapped around her waist. She asked me how my morning was going, this woman about my mother's age, adjusting her fetching cat's-eye glasses.

We talked. She told me about her job at the "DV Shelter" by Woodhull Hospital. What does DV stand for, I asked. Disabled Veterans? No, Domestic Violence, she said.

Where did I work, she asked.

Oh, I work at a college.

We smiled together in the dry, made-up heat. I told her that I dearly love my students.

I know how that is, she said, nodding.

As she spoke I saw that her left breast was bound up by a long scar that ran right where her nipple would have been. She hadn't been to water aerobics for a while—she'd been out of commission, she said, gesturing to her torso with her left arm. But now she was back.

That's so great, I grinned. Yes. She was really glad, she said,

she was really really glad to be back too.

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